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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 AMMAN 000832

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/03/2014

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN FM DISCUSSES PEACE PROCESS, RELATIONS
WITH ISRAEL AND SYRIA, AND OTHER ISSUES WITH NEA DAS
SATTERFIELD

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Jordanian FM Marwan Muasher told visiting NEA DAS Satterfield on February 1 that he was pushing for an Arab League resolution to help bolster the peace process, including a provision that would specifically condemn suicide bombings. He said it remained unclear whether the Arab League summit would take place as scheduled in Tunis. Muasher spoke January 30 with Syrian Foreign Minister Shara on strengthening Syrian-Jordanian relations and discussed King Abdullah's upcoming trip to Syria. The King is wary of undertaking travel to Syria beyond a planned opening of the Unity Dam on the border without a pledge for a return visit by Syrian President Asad to Amman. Muasher was very concerned about Jordan's relations with Israel and complained that the Israelis had given Hizbollah a far better prisoner release deal than they were willing to give Jordan. Given this disparity of treatment, Muasher said he would not receive Israeli FM Shalom until an agreement was reached that included release of the four long-time prisoners convicted of murder. Muasher assured Satterfield that Jordan's recent filing with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against the Israeli security wall was strictly legal in its approach and did not stray into final-status issues. He pledged to continue negotiations with the U.S. over an Article 98 agreement. End Summary.

ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN UPDATE

2. (C) NEA DAS David Satterfield and the Ambassador met February 1 with Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher. Satterfield briefed Muasher on his recent conversations with both Palestinians and Israelis during his visit to the region and said that both sides, driven in large part by domestic pressures and reasons, are seriously talking about taking steps needed for sustainable progress. Muasher remarked that he had recently talked with Abu Mazen, who told him that the time may now be right to strike a deal with Arafat whereby Arafat would be granted freedom of movement within the West Bank/Gaza in exchange for meeting all the stringent conditions that we have asked for. Muasher did not comment on the merits of this suggestion, but said he was merely passing it along for U.S. consideration. (Separately, Abu Mazen had lamented that Arafat "would never change.")

SOMETHING POSITIVE FOR THE ARAB LEAGUE?

3. (C) Asked about plans for Arab League summit action on the peace process, Muasher said that he spoke with Amre Moussa and other Arab leaders at Davos about this subject. Muasher opined that Arab states need to play a constructive role and that, if a summit is held, he was going to push for an Arab League resolution consisting of four parts, which he had already drafted. First, a condemnation of the killing of civilians by both sides, with a specific denouncement of suicide bombings. According to Muasher, this would help provide "Arab cover" for the Palestinians to take action against the organizers of suicide operations. Second, a statement supporting efforts to reach a comprehensive and permanent hudna, to be followed by "significant steps" to restart peace negotiations. Third, a call on Israel to state its acceptance of the roadmap without conditions. Fourth, a reaffirmation of the Arab League's peace initiative from the Beirut summit.

4. (C) Muasher acknowledged that he was unsure if he could persuade Arab League members to support such a resolution. He had already spoken to Saudi FM Saud about his plan, but got only a lukewarm reaction. While Saud wasn't opposed to the idea, he instead was focused on legalistic actions, such as "registering" the language of the Beirut initiative with the UN, a move which Muasher and Satterfield agreed was irrelevant given numerous UNSC endorsements of the Beirut document. Muasher intended to pursue his resolution idea with Saud and others at the February 14 meeting of

"neighboring states (to Iraq)" in Kuwait.

15. (C) Concerning the status of the Arab League summit in Tunis, Muasher commented that Tunis was now uncertain if it wanted to host it. He said that the Tunisians were afraid that the summit might be seen as a failure, which would reflect badly on President Ben Ali during an election year. The Tunisians were also concerned about possible security threats. The summit could be moved to the League's headquarters in Cairo, but Egyptian President Mubarak told King Abdullah that he was not keen on this since he was not planning to go to Tunis, but would be forced to attend the summit if it were held in Egypt.

JORDAN-SYRIA RELATIONS: MOVING AHEAD?

16. (C) During the January 25 visit of Syrian Prime Minister Otri to Amman for the signing of a regional gas project, Muasher said, both he and Prime Minister Faisal Al-Fayez urged Otri for better communication and coordination between their two governments to help overcome current "barbs" in Jordanian-Syrian relations. Five days later, Syrian FM Shara gave Muasher a "very friendly" call to say that President Bashar Asad had been briefed on these remarks, and that Asad wants to coordinate more closely with Jordan on issues of common concern. Shara added that Asad was looking forward to King Abdullah's upcoming visit to Syria to inaugurate the Wahda (Unity) dam.

17. (C) According to Muasher, the Syrians are proposing that King Abdullah continue on to Damascus after the ceremony at the dam. King Abdullah, however, is wary of going to Damascus without a commitment by the Syrians that Asad will make a return visit to Jordan. The King has made several trips to Syria without any reciprocal travel by Syria's chief of state and he feels that it is only fair for Asad to now visit him. While Muasher said he believes recent signs that Asad clearly wants to further open up his country, he is skeptical whether Asad can pull the old guard and the Syrian bureaucracy in line with him.

JORDAN-ISRAEL RELATIONS: HITTING A SNAG

18. (C) Muasher said he was very worried that Jordanian-Israeli relations could "spin out of control." In concluding a prisoners release deal with Hizbollah, he opined that the Israelis did everything that they said they could not do for Jordan. Muasher stated that there were 24 Jordanians being held in Israel for "security-related" offenses, including the four long-time prisoners convicted of murder prior to the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. He explained that Jordanian officials had met with each of the detainees and that seventeen of them wanted to return to Jordan, including "the four," while six did not. Although Israel was prepared to release even more Jordanian prisoners, Muasher said that these others were "criminals" and that the GOJ frankly did not care whether they were freed. Prior to Israel's deal with Hizbollah, Jordan had come very close to a prisoner release agreement with Israel except for the issue of "the four," which Muasher was prepared at that point to defer until later. However, the Israeli swap with Hizbollah transformed the prisoner issue for Jordan.

19. (C) According to Muasher, while Jordan had wanted Israeli FM Shalom to visit Amman as scheduled in January, the announcement of the deal with Hizbollah two days before the visit "put us in an impossible situation." That same day, the Israeli ambassador to Jordan called Muasher and asked about a meeting between Shalom and King Abdullah. Muasher said that this had never been promised and that, in his opinion, it was not necessary. The Israeli ambassador stated that Shalom would not come to Amman if he could not see the King. Later, Shalom called Muasher and asked why he was not welcome in Jordan. Muasher responded that he was very welcome, to which Shalom said he would "look like a fool" if he didn't meet with the King. Muasher then asked Shalom how he thought the King would look if he met with the Israeli FM after public disclosure of Israel's agreement with Hizbollah and no similar release of Jordanians.

10. (C) Muasher emphasized that Israel must now come up with a prisoner release deal for Jordan that includes "the four." If such an agreement is reached, Shalom's visit to Amman can be rescheduled and the King will receive him. Otherwise, after talking things over with King Abdullah, Muasher said that both he and the King would refuse to meet with Shalom. While Jordan wants to improve its dialogue with Israel, Muasher stated that this was not possible in the current environment and that Israel was clearly taking Jordan for granted.

THE BARRIER

11. (C) The Israeli security wall is a "vital issue" to Jordan, Muasher stated, as it affected Jordan's own security. He assured Satterfield and the Ambassador that Jordan's filing with the ICJ (a copy of which he offered to provide) was "very legal" in its approach and focused on the fact that the wall was being built in "occupied territory," as opposed to "disputed territory." As such, Israel had a legal obligation to preserve the territory's status/integrity and must reverse the wall's construction. Israel's argument that the wall was an act of self-defense, said Muasher, was only valid if the wall was built on Israel's own territory.

12. (C) Muasher also stated that the filing did not go into other issues and that Jordan would wait to examine all the briefs before deciding whether it would participate in oral debate before the court. Satterfield took note that Jordan's filing had stuck to legal questions, rather than final status matters, but reiterated that the U.S. had a difference of opinion with Jordan on the ICJ case.

ARTICLE 98 AND ARAB REFORM

13. (C) Muasher said that the GOJ had closely examined the most recent U.S. proposal for an Article 98 agreement. While this proposal reflected the real progress achieved by negotiations, it still did not resolve Jordan's concerns regarding the possible transfer of population. Jordan's latest proposal had "put us in trouble with the ICC," said Muasher. The GOJ was now waiting on the U.S. response and ready to reconvene talks in March. Satterfield responded that the U.S. was carefully examining the Jordanian proposal. He assured Muasher that any disagreements on the Article 98 issue would not harm U.S.-Jordan relations.

14. (C) Muasher was satisfied with preparations for the meeting in Egypt on Arab reform to build upon earlier discussions in Aqaba. According to Muasher, Gamal Mubarak's office was doing a good job following-up with NGOs, including women's groups, and the invitations it had issued indicated that the meeting would cover all the issues that Jordan hoped it would address (i.e., political and economic reform items).

OIL AND IRAQ

15. (C) Both Kuwait and the UAE, Muasher complained, had failed to provide any money to Jordan this year to help Jordan purchase oil. He worried that the two Gulf countries might not even deliver funds for the last three months of 2003 as agreed. The Saudis had kept silent about their intentions since King Abdullah's visit, but Muasher was not optimistic.

16. (C) Turning to Iraq, Muasher said that Jordan was opposed to the idea of federalism and that he would discuss this issue with Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari during the upcoming "neighboring states" meeting in Kuwait. Satterfield said that the coalition believed it would be able to meet the concerns of Shi'a leader Ayatollah Sistani and the U.S. would not change its timeline for the creation of a transitional government this summer. Satterfield also welcomed a UN role in the transition process.

COMMENT

17. (C) Muasher was relaxed and cordial during the approximately 80 minute meeting at his home. His statements on the prisoner release issue with Israel in the wake of the Hizbollah deal are of particular concern. They represent a hardening of Jordan's previous stance.

18. (U) NEA DAS Satterfield did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.
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